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Making sense of innovative and disruptive news in the digital age

Chrysi Dagoula, University of Groningen

Launched in 2012, Zetland (zetland.dk) is a Danish media company that approaches digital journalism as 'a force of good'. Its mission contains a paradox: it is simple but simultaneously complex – not to make news but to make sense of it. Through its diverse practices that vary from daily publications in a custom-built platform to pioneering shows of 'performed' journalism, Zetland's aim is to tell stories worth remembering that integrate audiences – as co-creators in all journalistic processes – to be able to distribute knowledge and build a well-informed community. Since their founding, a lot has changed. Although its core remained the same, Zetland recently expanded, raising two million euros, broadening its team with 25 new members and adding the publication of a daily in-depth digital newspaper, all the while experimenting with new paradigms of digital journalism.

Lea Korsgaard, Zetland's editor-in-chief, discusses the news website's vision and reflects on its innovative and disruptive work.

Journalism is certainly changing, and the types of news and ways people consume and share news is changing as well – where do you see Zetland in this?

If Zetland has a main contribution to the disruption of classic journalism it is that it reshapes or reconstructs the relationship between media and media users. From the very beginning, when we launched Zetland in 2012, we called our subscribers 'members'. It just made sense in a project where you have the ability not only to talk to people but actually to talk with them. So from the very beginning we looked at our users as much more than just subscribers or passive customers. In the twentieth century journalists established their authority by standing on a pedestal and talking to an audience. Today, I think, journalists establish their authority when they place themselves among the audience and not only talk to them but also talk with them. This is really the fundamental shift, I think. This is something that we are heavily invested in.

With Zetland you're not only telling stories differently, but also through live performances – how would you describe the mix of what you do?

Zetland started as a small digital media publishing one 'e-single' a month reported and written in the tradition of narrative journalism. Today we have shifted gears and run a daily, digital newspaper with one core mission: to cut through the noise and offer our members background information and perspective on the most important stories of the time – the 'must-understand' stories as we say. Also, we have a live format, Zetland Live, that brings journalism onstage in a fun, smart and often thought-provoking fashion. What glues these things together is our community-building aspect, and the fact that we use journalism to – quite literally – bring people together. For us journalism has never been the goal in itself; journalism is not the end, journalism is the means to an end. And the end is to create a community, or in fact maybe create a public, that uses journalism, that uses knowledge, that uses stories – 'deep' stories and 'deep reporting' – to better understand each other and to better engage with each other so that they are able to collectively express their hopes and desires of the future. In fact, if you think about it, this approach is rather old school; it is a very Habermasian way of thinking about journalism and about the media's role in a society: journalism as the fundamental driver of the public's conversation with itself. It's not primarily a genre, it is not primarily a specific work ethic or a certain method, rather, journalism is fact-based, non-fiction stories that gives people, in large-scale societies, the opportunity to get to know each other in the same intimate way we knew each other when we were all village people. Journalism, as a consequence, needs an audience, a community, to become journalism. If no one – or hardly anyone – reads a news post or an op-ed, it is not journalism. They are just words on a paper. If we think about art, is quite the opposite: if just one single person looks at a piece of art and say 'this is art!' – then it's art per definition, I'd say. It is not the same thing with journalism. A journalistic piece needs large numbers of people to engage with it.

Drawing on that, you said in a conference in Amsterdam that you are not terribly bothered by whether you are called a journalist, or not, but that it is what you do that is important. Is this statement also related to what you said before?

Yeah, absolutely. I am proud of what I do and proud to call myself a journalist but that is not enough for me, that is not the main point of what I do. The main point is to get people to meet and talk and share knowledge. If I use a classic journalistic story in a classic format to do that, then that is fine, but if I use an invitation to meet at the bar after one of our live shows and use the conversation at the bar as means to this end, then that is in a sense journalism for me as well. Or at least is as good as a journalistic piece for me. The most important thing is the transfer of knowledge.

What inspired the whole concept?

There is a difference between Zetland the media and Zetland Live. Let's start from Zetland the media. I was a feature writer at one of Denmark's major legacy newspapers before and in many ways I had my dream job, but I couldn't help but notice that this dream job would eventually disappear some day when the death of the classic newspaper would occur. Remember, this was only ten years ago but there was still no online experience for reading in-depth stories, so I was genuinely worried that my beloved long-form narratives would suffer a slow and painful death. Something had to be done. So I thought 'why not do it myself?'. We – myself and my three current partners and friends who are journalists as well – had this idea to build a magazine for the twenty-first century dedicated to long-form narratives. And I wish I could say that we had this super clear vision or brilliant business strategy that we followed, but in fact there was none of that. We just had this hunch: the world needs better digital journalism, so let's go for it. The business strategy came later on.

Now, about Zetland Live, our inspiration for Zetland Live came from various sources:

Firstly, we heard about the 'Pop Up Magazine' project in San Francisco and we spoke with one of their contributors. We had never experienced it ourselves, but genuinely liked the idea: to combine a printed magazine and a stage show. What would that look like, we wondered. Secondly, we had moved offices so we had a house warming event in our new office and because we know that every great party is defined by the quality of the stories that come out

of it, we asked three guests to tell five-minute stories for everyone at the party. It could be about anything non-fiction, and they ended up telling stories about Danish Jazz history, the exotic dancer Josephine Baker from the 1930s, and the disintegration of the modern dance floor. That was fun! And we liked the super sharp and short format. Thirdly, Zetland's co-founder, Hakon Mosbech, is very much into music and he kept saying: 'Hey, let's bring music to journalism'. Even though, he could not really explain what that would look like, that thought stuck – and in a combination of all three sources of inspiration, Zetland Live emerged: A 90-minute show that brings journalism onstage at a theatre somewhere in Denmark and creates a very special room for sharing knowledge, stories and visions. There is also another, personal inspiration that comes from the fact that I was born and raised at a Danish folk high school. This is a very specific Danish school tradition built on the notion that 'teacher and students should be aligned'. The basic notion is to build a school of life with no strict hierarchy. Teachers should be an inspiration more than harsh educators with the students. You take a year off between high school and university to go the folk high school and you basically live at the school with your teachers and your classmates. You live the school. This tradition is also built on the notion that 'the written word is dead and the spoken word is alive'. So there is a lot of storytelling, there is a lot of singing, there is a lot of, say, light in this school tradition. It really runs in my veins. And I think that somewhere in the concept of our live show there is a link back to this tradition. However, maybe that it is just how I interpret how this all happened because when it did happen, it felt more or less like a not very thought-out experiment. We certainly hadn't seen the show's huge success coming.

Regarding live-shows, what is the desired outcome of them and what has been the reception to these?

The desired outcome was to build a community and to communicate our stories. I think when you do not get your journalism from paper anymore, when there is no longer a tactile way of consuming journalism, you risk losing something very important. I think that the physical stage and the actual meeting in a physical space serve as a substitution for the paper in a sense. It gives the journalism a kind of body. Zetland Live is the epicentre of our community. The first show sold 100 tickets but it soon gained a large audience. This fall we had a show at the Danish Royal Theatre in Copenhagen which attracted more than 1400 people and sold out

in eight or nine days. All we had to do to sell out was to send an e-mail to our members. It proved to me that there is a need out there for the kinds of spaces where you are forced to turn off your phone and just be present at one place at one time – while others are present at the same time with you. It takes your experience to another level that you share it with other people. It shows a thirst for meaning outside our private filter bubbles. It's journalism as a romantic space.

Moving back to the platform, could you respond to the discussion of journalism as 'checks and balances' and 'making the powerful tremble' in the context of Zetland? How is Zetland different from that view of journalism, or possibly how does Zetland address these points?

Journalism's role in society is, of course, to fill out the 'watchdog' role, report on those in power and keeping sure that those in power act in service of the public. But, in my view, to be a watchdog – no matter how important that role is – can never be the sole purpose of the press. To report on the public's needs, its dreams and fears are as important. However, at Zetland we definitely feel an obligation to critically report on those in power and, tell the in-depth, behind-the-scenes stories of what really happened, as we did, for example when the government decided to sell the state-owned energy company DONG to Goldman Sachs. When we at Zetland turn our back against and ultra, ultra, fast deadlines, we also do that, because we think the pace in the current news business does nothing good for the watchdog's barking.

Do you consider yourself a disruptor? Or perhaps an innovator?

I don't think upon myself as a disruptor, no. There is something about, if you are a disruptor, you come with a sword in your hand and you scream at others. We don't do that. So I like the term innovator better. I think that what we do at Zetland is to take an old storytelling tradition and put it into new forms. We merge old media with new media. Stage shows with journalism. Technology with editorial processes. That's what innovators do. Innovators combine already known ideas and artefacts from different spheres and get new stuff and new ideas out of that process.

Since Zetland is subscription-based, how does this work in terms of its viability?

Our new platform uses the sharing model that De Correspondent – the Dutch media start-up – invented. If you are a member of Zetland, then you can share all the articles you want with anyone. You support Zetland and for your support you gain access to curating our content for your friends and followers. And by doing that you help us spread the word and convert visitors to paying members. We call it ‘the generous model’. I like that.

You used to publish long-form pieces (singles), but now Zetland has entered a new era by introducing a new platform. Could you expand on this?

Our new platform launched in March 2016 is a digital-born ‘slow’ media that goes behind the news stream and give our members background and analysis on the biggest stories and issues of the time. Journalism has – for a vast majority of the legacy media – used new technology to speed up the pace and publish more and more stories, and forgotten that part of journalism’s mission that tells us as journalist to cut through the noise, to choose on behalf of the readers, and to edit. We use technology to revitalize that mission and publish only the stories that our readers need to know – and nothing more than they have time to read. We do not tell that something happens, we focus only on why it happens and why it matters.

Could you describe how you are shifting to stories that your readers need to know?

We still have a wildly engaged audience that on a daily basis (at least the most hard-core readers) participate in the ongoing development of our stories and business. I still think our e-singles were of a very high journalistic quality (we won some prizes for them), but they didn’t fulfil the busy media users’ need for getting both overview and perspective at the same time. That’s what we’re trying to do with our daily news-paper: Explaining the news by publishing only a few in-depth stories each day – the most important stuff you need to understand about what’s really going on in politics, society and the world of culture, but not more than you can actually manage to read. It’s an operation that’s definitely more costly, compared to the organization we had, when we we’re only four people publishing e-singles from a back yard in Copenhagen. Today we’ve raised two million euros and have a staff of 25 people who work a

lot to prove that it's still worth paying money to get a bunch of gifted journalists to explain to you what's going on in the world.

Singles have been a significant part of your portfolio – and will still pop up from time to time on your platform. Can you tell us more about them?

We used to publish one story a month and in terms of length, they were longer than articles but shorter than books. The aim was that they could be read in a single setting that's why they were called 'singles'. You could sit down in your sofa and read an in-depth story that took you one hour to read. We have covered more or less anything that we found interesting. It has been politics, pop, sports, it has been 'whatever', in fact. Although we have had some success with the format, we decided to change its form.

What is the biggest challenge facing an organization like Zetland – where do you see it going in the next five years?

Well, first of all we have to meet our goal as we run a business. Just to start with the numbers, in order to meet our goal and to get a healthy business running we have to get 14,500 paying members in two years. Denmark is such a small country and there is no place in the market for a cult media that only targets a very narrow group of people, so we need to get to the market that doesn't belong to the small Copenhagen media bubble. And also I think we're not relevant as a medium if we're not able to get out of Copenhagen. One, because of the business model and, two, because we're here as a force of good! And we're not any way near our mission if we're only relevant to a small circle of Copenhageners. And in the next five years? Oh gosh, I wish I knew! Our goal is to become a key player in the Danish media market still devoted to our mission: using journalism to create a community for curious people that want to understand the world – so that they can make it better. How we do it will always be less important for us than why we do it.

Contributor details

Chrysi Dagoula is an assistant professor in the Department of Media Studies and Journalism, at the University of Groningen. She earned her Ph.D., titled 'The ongoing structural transformations of the digital public sphere(s): The role of journalism', in 2017 from the University of Sheffield. Her research reflects her broader academic interests in the developments in digital journalism and in digital political communication, especially regarding the effect of social media on journalism, as well as the diachronic relationships between journalism and democracy within public sphere theory. Her expertise also includes digital and social media research.

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